Future Crowds Will Fill Silent Slopes

Bee Photos

SNOW WILDERNESS — Sequoia Forest Ranger Tom Adams with help of dog, Brutus, starts snow survey in Mineral King Valley coincident with arrival of a Walt Disney Productions team to make a winter-long study of the valley and the surrounding slopes. The study is a preliminary move in Disney's plan to turn what now is an almost inaccessible High Sierra wilderness into a multimillion dollar ski resort. There are 4 feet of snow on the valley floor, twice that much higher up.

PROTECTIVE INSTINCT — Alert Brutus stands ready to protect his master, Ranger Adams, right, just in case the strange man with that curious thing called a camera makes a threatening move. At side of snow-tractor is Ranger Dick Ferneau. At this time of year, the tractor is the only sort of vehicle that can climb the snow-filled road into Mineral King. And even it found the going tough.

WINTER VIGIL — Bill Decarteret, left, who operates a summer pack station in Mineral King Valley, accompanied the Disney survey team — Gary Poulson, center, and Willy Stark — up to the snow-filled bowl, where they will spend the winter. As soon as they get settled, Stark and Poulson expect their wives to join them in their long vigil. They will map possible ski runs, check avalanche courses, and study the weather patterns as guides to future development.

OPERATIONS BASE — This is Mineral King Village, a collection of privately owned summer cabins, store, dining room and gasoline station recently purchased by Disney. This is the base of operations for the Disney winter-research team, and someday will be a modernized segment of the Mineral King development project, on which Disney proposes to spend up to $35 million to accommodate as many as 20,000 visitors a day.

Disney Survey Team Findings Will Guide Resort Development

By Ron Taylor
Fresno Bee staff writer

MINERAL KING, Tulare Co. — Today, a year after the U.S. Forest Service called for a $3 million development of this Alpine valley, two Walt Disney skiers are taking the first steps, through deep snow drifts, leading to a $35 million resort and mountain playland.

Willy Stark and Gary Poulson, the Disney snow - survey team, will spend most of the winter in Mineral King and up in the high bowls which eventually will accommodate 20,000 skiers a day.

The Disney team spent two days this week getting its equipment into storm battered, snow-filled Mineral King village. Today, weather permitting, they were to fly over the entire area by helicopter to get an over-all view of the work to come.

At the same time, Sequoia National Forest rangers completed a newly instituted early winter snow survey, finding a pack of nearly 100 inches in Farewell Gap and 48 inches on the valley floor.

14 Ski Lifts

Development of Disney's proposed 14 ski lifts, two hotels, 10 restaurants, chalets and other facilities still depends on getting federal or state authorization and funding or construction of a new, all year highway. The cost estimate is $5 million to $10 million.

This week, because of the heavy new snow, the forest survey trip up the crooked 25 mile Mineral King Road took three hour, the last 15 miles were made in a track vehicle which plunged, snarled and growled its way through deep, soft snow.

I went in with the Forest Service group headed by Dick Phillips. The sky was dull lead color, the clouds spitting snow, the trees heavily laden with it. The steep - walled mountains and rocky peaks that ring Mineral King were shrouded in the storm.

Phillips, Tom Adams, Dick Ferneau and Gene Burgdorf set out early the next morning to climb three miles and 2,500 feet up into the Farewell Gap snow course in near-blizzard conditions. The first mile was by snowcat, the last two by skis bottomed with fur climbers.

Wind whipped corn snow stung their faces, drove against their eyes. Glasses and goggles fogged up. Visibility was only a few feet at times and the snow was so soft they sank nearly waist-deep climbing up the steep, narrow "chute."

I traveled only part way, then skied back down through the valley to meet the Disney survey crew, expected by mid-afternoon. Alone, with the wind-whipped snow whispering through the edge of my parka, I got the feeling of absolute solitude.

The tracks of small animals disappeared under the fresh flakes. The wind and water sculptured snow along the creek gave an indication of direction. Some day skiers will be riding back this way from the big lift complex into Farewell and White Chief, heading for the lodge, a big fire and a warming cup.

The storm kept the Disney crew out that day, but the next morning dawned bright and they came in, accompanied by Bill DeCarteret, the summer village operator and packer. In addition to the snow tractor, they brought a snow motor scooter, a small trail buggy built specifically for snow travel.

Disney now owns the "village" with its old store, dining room, single gasoline pump and half a dozen cabins. It's a primitive start for what is to come, but in a way it is appropriate, too.

Mineral King is an old, primitive mountain valley, opened in the late 1800s for silver mining.

Operations Base

Two of the cabins and the dining room will be the base of operations for Stark and Poulson, who plan to bring in their wives later.

"We will spend a lot of time up here," Stark said, "but we will also be going in and out. We have a lot of information to gather, a lot of testing to do. One of my first trips out will be to the weather bureau."

Using snow and weather information gathered by both the bureau and the Forest Service as a base, the men will set up testing and measuring stations They also will do some preliminary ski trail routing.

Their task is awesome. Climbing 7,800 feet up into the 10,000 and 11,000-foot White Chief, Eagle and Mosquito Bowls is the most strenuous kind of work, and it can be dangerous. Included in their research will be the observation and location of avalanche conditions and tracks.

When will the public be able to ski up here? This question is still open, depending upon the road construction commitment, primarily. Disney officials have estimated resort and lift construction time for initial development at four years.

This could start as soon as road project is definite and the Forest Service approves Disney's construction plans, and issues a long term lease permit. The initial permit allows only for surveys and planning.

The first phase of construction would center around the proposed Disney Village and the development of the Mosquito Basin system of lifts, beginners' lifts and administrative facilities. A 2,500-car parking facility is planned above the present forest guard station.

Willie Schaeffler, an international ski expert and Disney's adviser on the ski layout for Mineral King, said there eventually will be up to 30 miles of intermediate and beginner trails, in addition to expert slopes capable of testing Olympic competition.

Although long hours and many thousands of dollars have been spent already on the proposed Mineral King development, the arrival of the Disney snow survey team actually brings the work to the valley.

The time lapse between Stark's and Poulson's first tracks through the snow and those made by thousands bombing down the manicured slopes probably will be 10 years, if all goes as hoped. By 1976, skiers will lift up into Farewell and White Chief, and work the upper bowls all day, stopping for rest and food in warming-huts and cafeterias on the slopes.

From places like White Chief Peak they can view the crest of the Sierra and look down 3,000 feet below on the snowy chalets and hotel roofs of the village. Between now and then there must be a lot of hard work and it starts with Stark and Poulson.

On cold, clear winter nights temperatures drop to near zero. Deep snows make travel difficult. On skis, after a new snow, you may sink to your knees. Getting water for cooking and washing dishes is a chore, requiring either digging down to the stream or melting snow in big pots.

To make the surveys and tests, Stark and Poulson will be out early each morning, climbing two or three hours up into the bowls, picking their way across steep slopes, proving snow depths and measuring water content.

What may start out as a routine trip up into the peaks can be turned into an all-day and part of the night struggle by a sudden, fierce storm. In Farewell Gap high winds, funneled by blanking crags, howl and blow snow.

When the storm is over, the clouds break and the sun shines into white canyon walls. All your weariness is swept away by the sight of Mineral King below and the bright, white world of snow and rook and trees.

Looking down across the valley and up to Timber Gap and Saw Tooth, it is hard to realize what is being planned. It is all so quiet and beautiful.

As Stark and Poulson climb the canyons and ski the big bowls, they probably will be mentally ticking off possible ski runs. Up on the edge of the timber, down Miner's Ridge and across the flanks of the western valley wall — these will be the routes to be tested, re-tested and finally worked into ski runs.

Full development of Mineral King is hard to visualize now. Its future still has a lot of "ifs" in it, but the fact that Stark and Paulson are working here is one more indicator that the proposal will become a reality.

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TRAIL-BLAZER — Brutus, a veteran of the snow-country, has no trouble blazing a trail through the thick blanket of soft white stuff which covers the valley. And he does it without snowshoes.

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